

Linguistic cultural heritage of politeness strategies among the Shona and Ndebele of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This paper explores sets of expectations and perceptions underlying the use or not, of a selection of words, phrases and expressions in the Shona and Ndebele languages. The study broaches Leech's (Leech 1983; 2007) politeness principle on the language of discretion as a result of silent and tacit cultural expectations in relation to interpersonal communication where using language with caution helps to protect one's words from being misquoted, dismissed, mistranslated or distorted. Through an exploration of Brown and Levinson's (Brown and Levinson, 1987) politeness theory as well as Kasanga and Lwanga-Lumu's (Kasanga and Lwanga-Lumu, 2007) postulations on "politeness and apology realisation", this paper seeks to derive meaning and understanding from hedges and cautious reserves in speech. The use of discreet language reflects a high degree of efficiency in social interaction as speakers take precautionary measures to protect themselves from the negative effect of their sayings or to protect themselves or their interlocutors from any harm caused by their utterances. The Shona and Ndebele languages have phrases/words like "padiki padiki" and "azikhuphi" which are indicative of the effort to conceal with a measure of politeness, the actual detail and truth surrounding an individual's life. Through an ethnographic survey of the use of hedges by Shona and Ndebele speakers, this paper will contribute towards an appreciation of the language of discretion and hedging as valuable intangible cultural heritage which helps to communicate politely, mitigate face-threats, and also to convey vagueness purposely. These play a pivotal role in expression of ideas/claims and mastery of rhetorical strategies required in conversational circumstances.

Keywords

Politeness Strategies, Cautious Reserve, Shona, Ndebele Languages.

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Introduction

Politeness, keeping up appearances and saving face are consistently emerging topics where communication and human social relations are concerned. The universality of the need for politeness in language use is clearly propounded by Brown and Levinson (Brown and Levinson, 1987) who consider politeness as a fundamental aspect of human socio-communicative verbal interaction. They also opine that when interacting, all adult members of a society are aware of the need to carefully consider the expectations of the interlocutor so as to maintain good and positive communication. Mao (Mao, 1994) however critiqued Brown and Levinson’s postulations arguing that they had failed “to address discourse behaviours in other non-Western cultures where the underlying interactional focus is centred not upon individualism but upon group identity” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 452). The present chapter contends that the way in which politeness is perceived in speech is significantly culturally oriented and therefore the ways of expressing politeness are embedded with cultural nuances tied to a particular society. We illustrate in this paper that the cultural practices that underpin language use are a legacy passed down from generation to generation which are often reproduced with little critical engagement and consideration. This chapter sets out to analyse the discourse of politeness that is peculiar to the Ndebele and Shona tribes of Zimbabwe. Through analysis of the language use in these two tribal groups, this paper will strive to show the differences and similarities with which the two languages, and indeed cultures, approach cautious reserve and politeness.

The reason for targeting the Shona and Ndebele Languages in this research resides in the demographic reality of these two languages being the two most spoken native languages among the people of Zimbabwe, therefore constituting a majority representation of the Zimbabwean people and their cultures. The terms Shona and Ndebele are used in this paper to designate the two groups in Zimbabwe and also the languages which they speak.

1. Methodology

From the survey of politeness strategies by mother tongue speakers of Shona and Ndebele interesting data was drawn and analysed. Twenty respondents aged between 20 and 36 were involved. Of these, thirteen were female and 7 male. Fourteen were Shona mother tongue speakers and six were Ndebele mother tongue speakers. Respondents were randomly selected from campus students and employees at the University of Zimbabwe. Choice for the sample space was purely made on grounds of geographical proximity and accessibility for the researchers.

By use of questionnaires dispatched to the twenty mother tongue speakers of Shona and Ndebele languages who were chosen through random sampling, a survey of commonly used phrases and terms was carried out in an attempt to explore some linguistic practices which are rooted in cultural notions of what is considered polite, respectful, acceptable and unacceptable. Fourteen informants were Shona mother tongue native speakers, and six were Ndebele mother tongue native speakers. The information given by the respondents on questionnaires were the chief source of texts that were analysed in this research. Scrutiny-based techniques were used to analyse open ended questions within the questionnaire, particularly in question 11 (Can you add any other information about how you use language carefully and why, in your mother tongue?), which offered respondents the liberty to explore any area of politeness strategies that had not been addressed in earlier questions. Through qualitative open coding, and "constant comparison method" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), themes and patterns of data from written texts

were identified, compared/contrasted, and discussed in order to reach an understanding of ways of encoding politeness and caution in speech among Ndebele and Shona speakers. Finally conclusions were drawn from these examples presented.

2. Theoretical Framework

For the purposes of this research, Brown's (Brown, 2015) definition of politeness underpins the discussion around forms of language use affected by politeness theory. According to Brown, there are 'emic' (culture specific) notions tied to politeness; hence, politeness is conventionally attached to certain linguistic forms and formulaic expressions, which may be very different in different languages and cultures.

The motivations for the need to be polite are discussed in this chapter in line with Brown and Levinson's (Brown and Levinson, 1987) model of politeness categorised into face and rationality. Brown (Brown, 2015: 327) clearly underlines face as two specific human wants: "positive face (the desire to be approved of, admired, liked, and validated), and negative face (the desire to be un-imposed upon, or unimpeded in one's actions)" while rationality is "the ability to reason from communicative goals to linguistic means that would achieve these goals." This is what leads to the notion of face-threatening acts (FTAs). These are acts that risk public/social image damage to speakers' and hearers' face wants: their negative-face wants that their actions are not impeded by others and their positive-face wants that their qualities/characteristics are desirable to others.

Intercultural discourse in this paper will be explored within the framework of Leech's (Leech, 1983; 2007) politeness principle. Leech argues that human communicative behaviour is constrained by a number of politeness maxims or constraints that include amongst others modesty and agreement, and that the relative importance of these constraints can vary across cultures. Whilst there are universal politeness norms that are inherent to many languages, this paper adopts Mills' (Mills, 2003) position that appropriate politeness strategies differ from culture to culture. We therefore discuss in this paper some distinctive phenomena tied to politeness among the Shona and Ndebele, whereby the underlying motivations for courtesy are deeply rooted in specific cultural postulations embedded in the people's history, experiences and interpretation of reality thereof.

3. Literature Review

In a paper exploring the relationship between politeness and language use, Brown (Brown, 2015: 326) underscores how politeness is ubiquitous in language use, given that in the generic sense "politeness is essentially a matter of taking into account the feelings of others as to how they should be interactionally treated". This, taking account of people's feelings, encapsulates saying and doing things in a less straightforward or more elaborate manner than when one is not taking such feelings into consideration. Hence, ways of being polite probably provide probably the most pervasive source of indirectness, reasons for not saying exactly what one means, and in how people frame their communicative intentions in formulating their utterances.

In politeness research, several scholars such as Brown and Levinson (Brown and Levinson, 1987), Finegan (Finegan, 2012), Mashiri (Mashiri, 2002), Mullany (Mullany, 2012) have discussed commonly known identified ways of being polite when speaking. These include use of lexical repetitions, use of modal markers, and avoidance of some words in conversations.

Examples of lexical repetition are reduplicated routines which are used to reinforce positive politeness, such as right or okay to mark a conversational closure and to express flow of agreement among English speakers (Carter, 2004; Lindström, 2001). Bublitz (Bublitz, 1988) discusses lexical repetition by interlocutors as a way of politely supporting the first speaker’s utterance. This phenomenon is apparent in the Shona language greetings whereby to the respectful greeting *makadini* (how are you) one can give the polite response *makadini makadini* (how are you how are you). By repeating the interlocutor’s greeting, the response comes out as a polite affirmative statement that agrees with the original speaker’s greeting.

Buttery and McCarthy (Buttery and McCarthy, 2012) examine the use of the word think in conversations by English speakers as an interpersonal strategy for hedging and politeness in speech. Where one could say “this pattern should be changed”, the polite speaker is heard to say “I think this pattern could be changed”. Modal verbs, which express permission, possibility and certainty, are a common method of expressing requests politely among the Shona and Ndebele. This art of using modal verbs is proffered by Gotosa and Kadenge (Gotosa and Kadenge, 2016) who cite Mhlanga’s (Mhlanga, 2012) unpublished work on modal verbs which function as hedges in Shona; serving multiple functions which include toning down imperatives and commands. Verbs such as *taigona* (we could) *zvanga zviru nani* (it would be better) are used by the Shona to avoid the face threatening act of commanding or openly directing someone to do something.

Harvey and Adolphs (Harvey and Adolphs, 2012) analyse modal markers and mitigating devices which help to express optionality and tentativeness in a conversation, giving the appearance of allowing addressees to choose choice to accept or decline the message of the interlocutor. Some English modal markers that are used in order to encode politeness include “may, just, approximately, around, little, and right.” Where one could say “I am going to be late”, for politeness purposes the phrase could be restructured as “I may be late”. This is so that the act of lateness is not perceived as a deliberate impolite action.

Another way of registering politeness is proposed by Cheng et al. (Cheng et al., 2008) who underscore the need to avoid words that directly show divergent thoughts in a discussion so that one chooses to say “I may have a different view towards this”, instead of plainly indicating that “I do not agree”. The modal marker may serve the role of an epistemic softener which helps make the disagreement statement less authoritative.

In the case of a speaker who bears authority such as a political leader, O’Keeffe (O’Keeffe, 2006) points out how a power role holder can downplay his/her power through use of deixis (pointing) when speaking as a politeness strategy in order to be well received by the audience. Instead of pointing out the audience as ‘you’, the pronoun ‘we’ is used instead to tactfully close the social gap between the speaker and the audience. This is true also for the Shona language where an interlocutor who is a political figure would address a gathering of supporters saying “*tinoda vanhu vakatendeka munyika*” (we want honest people in the nation); “*hatidi vanhu vane undyire vanongozvifunga*” (we do not want people who are selfish, who only think of themselves). By use of the pronoun “we”, the speaker politely includes the audience in his or her manifesto, so that the hearers appear to be part of the mission of the speaker.

According to Mashiri (Mashiri, 2002: 2) “the Shona of Zimbabwe, like other African peoples, sometimes avoid direct responses to favour-expressing speech acts in view of the dangers such responses pose to the participants’ ‘face’ as well as to social and interpersonal harmony”. Therefore, Shona speakers communicate refusals through indirect communication styles. These

indirect styles refer to politeness strategies that camouflage and conceal speakers' true intentions in terms of their wants, needs, goals and attitudes in the discourse situation. By speaking indirectly, speakers use indirect Shona expressions to put across undesirable communication such as refusal. Candor is a quality not easily received among the Shona therefore the more one uses the cautious reserve when speaking, the more acceptable one's speech is.

4. Discussion

Out of the twenty respondents, 95% (19 respondents) claimed to use discretion as a strategy of politeness. In terms of use of greetings, firstly, in the case of one's family, respondents admitted to using commonly acceptable phrases to respond to a question asking how their family members were. Instead of giving any details, the usual response would be *vapenyu havo* (Shona for "they are all alive") or *variko havo* (they are all there). In Ndebele the common statement was recorded as *bayaphila* or *baziphilele* (they are well) regardless of the actual reality surrounding one's family. Where one is not doing well and is responding to a greeting, most respondents registered their likely response as *ndiri bho* (Shona for "I am well") or *ngiyaphila* (Ndebele for "I am well"), even when they are not doing well. A possible explanation for the use of discretion here is grounded first of all in following how one is socialised without much thought to it. The main reason behind the discretion in speech for both the Shona and Ndebele mother tongue speakers put together is the notion that 'it is culturally unacceptable to disclose one's private life to anyone' (Respondent 5, question 4).

Secondly, another factor that arose as the motivation for the cautious reserve when communicating in Shona and Ndebele languages is the belief in the spirit of *ubuntu*. Using the words of Archbishop Desmond *ubuntu* is a belief that "a person is a person through other persons, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself" (Tutu, 2008). According to the notion of *ubuntu*, "we" matters more than "I", therefore the language of Shona and Ndebele speakers is consistently tied to the idea of bringing out peaceful social cohesion through polite and cultured language use. As one respondent put it, "language carries the culture of the society in question. Careful use of language is a necessity since one does not want to be social misfit/renegade" (Respondent 5, question 11). As it is against the philosophy of *ubuntu* for both the Ndebele and Shona cultures "to act as if one is very proud of one's achievements, hence one cannot go around telling people about these achievements" (Respondent 2, question 11).

Thirdly, an interesting reason emerged as a motivation for discretion in speech, which is the long standing historical ties of Shona and Ndebele cultures with the notion of witchcraft. Of witchcraft among African cultures, Essein (Essein, 2010: 535) says, "Witchcraft has been a prevailing belief in African culture and has continually posed problems for the people. Epidemic, diseases, natural disasters and widespread political and social destruction are often connected to witches. People exhibiting unusual personal features, extraordinary behaviour, or excessive power, in other words people who disturb the balance and harmony of power relations, which are so important in African society, are easily accused of being witches".

From the information gathered from the respondents, it is clearly evident the presence of fear of being bewitched is one main reason for discretion in speech. In response to whether they were likely to disclose detail about their achievements to others, some respondents interestingly said no, by reason of fear of being bewitched, not purely out of humility (Respondents 6, 9, 10,

18 question 5). A third of the respondents pointed out the possibility of malice and bad luck as reasons why they choose to be politely discreet when talking about their lives, achievements. Pursuant to the need to appear humble, in the Shona culture, the cautious reserve of not boasting that one appears to be doing well more than others is not so much tied to politeness and humility as it is to the longstanding history of the spirit of bad luck, jealousy and witchcraft among families. Shona proverbs exist, which underscore the need for discretion and cautious reserve when communicating with others. Instead of disclosing where one is actually going, when asked to say where s/he is going a proverb *afamba apota* (Respondent 19, question 11) (one who has just gone around the corner, is at large) is used in response to avoid saying exactly where one is headed. In order not to decline responding to the question, a polite Shona speaker tactfully uses a proverb to express discretion in his/her response.

A gripping aspect of Shona and Ndebele cultures is highlighted in the use of discretion and caution in speech based on spiritual beliefs. Clive and Peggy Kileff (Clive and Peggy Kileff, 1970: 44) underprop the presence of spirits in Shona and Ndebele belief systems in that they “believe that their lives are controlled by the ancestral spirits” (*vadzimu* in Shona and *amadlozi* in Ndebele). The Shona and Ndebele are highly spiritual. They believe in ancestral spirits as guardians of the people or a deity that protects them. This belief in deified authority is expressed by both Shona and Ndebele language responses to congratulatory messages. The common response is to allude all successes to God, the ancestors or the encompassing family spirits that help in achieving success. (Respondents 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 15, 16, 19 question 7). This is the root out of which stems the belief that they do not move or stay alone but there are spirits who are always with them. Caution when choosing words is therefore also tied to this belief, for if one speaks inappropriately one risks angering the spirits which may attract misfortune (Respondent 9, question 11). The conception of respecting spiritual authority is promulgated by Tatira (Tatira, 2014: 106) who claims that generally the “Shona beliefs, like many other cultural beliefs elsewhere, derive their authority from the supernatural realm which make them effective in controlling human behaviour within Shona communities”. Belief in the authority of guardian spirits or deities and their power to protect or harm breeds the fear of breach of a belief mostly triggers a supernatural punishment, not only for the offender but for the whole community where the offender resides therefore making the observance of beliefs self-mandatory.

Beyond the use of discretion due to spiritual beliefs, the use of the plural pronoun in Shona greetings is also indicative of the people’s spirituality. There is a longstanding Shona belief that the ancestral spirits are elements that always hover around their people as guardian spirits, hence the response “*tiripo hedu kana makadiniwo*” (we are well and yourselves), to the greeting “*makadini*” (how are you doing?). While it could be argued that speakers at times will be referring to themselves and their families when they use the plural, the frequent use of the plural pronoun is also tied to the Shona belief that people are always in the presence of their guardian spirits, who go with them wherever they go.

The rich cultural heritage of language discretion among the Shona and Ndebele calls to mind the ‘cautious reserve’ principle which is posited by the Confucian theory as the ability to communicate correctly and effectively as well as appropriately being discreet, prudent, and restrained. A common motivation for the use of the ‘cautious reserve’ among the Shona and the Ndebele that was proffered by the informants is the desire for positive face. Due to the need for their qualities/characteristics to be desirable/acceptable to others, most respondents indicated how they are highly likely not to correct a speaker who is erroneously saying something that they, as the hearer, are so sure to be incorrect. The fear of confrontation, of hurting another’s pride, of embarrassing another, were given as reasons for not correcting a speaker’s incorrect